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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CACEN AND INR

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PBIO PINR PTER UZ

SUBJECT: AFTER THE BOMBINGS: KARIMOV'S DECISION-MAKING
DICHOTOMY

REFS: A) Tashkent 385 B) Tashkent 1052 C) Tashkent 726 D) Tashkent 2603

CLASSIFIED BY AMB. JON R. PURNELL, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary. This is the second of two cables, which provides insight into President Karimov's decision-making process. The first of which looked at Karimov's possible succession plans (ref D). Although Uzbekistan was rocked twice this year by terrorist bombings, little has changed for President Islom Karimov. The terrorist attacks have had little impact on either the population or Karimov's policies but have highlighted an apparent dichotomy in his decision-making and policy formulating ability: he is a keen analyst of regional security issues, but curiously passive about confronting domestic challenges. His hold on power, a number one concern, remains unchallenged, reducing his impetus to make any kind of change. End summary.

DICHOTOMY OF VISION

¶2. (C) When President Karimov makes decisions regarding policy for Uzbekistan, he most likely considers their impact on his own position first and foremost. Minister of Defense Gulomov (protect) indicated as much in confidence during a recent DOD visit when he told DCM (then Charge) that Karimov cares only about security and his position, and sometimes the two do not coincide. What is good for the country in the longer term is presumably also a factor in his calculations, since his legacy is inextricably linked to the success or failure of Uzbekistan as a state. However, short-term security concerns and maintaining his hold on power still remain top priority.

¶3. (C) Karimov is capable of strategic vision, especially regarding regional security. In this realm, his decision-making appears shrewd and rational; he readily acknowledges the U.S. role in Afghanistan as beneficial to Uzbek and Central Asian security. His concerns about internal Afghan politics and Russian influence in the region are well founded and clearly articulated. It is in this well defined area of security that we find a reasonable, intelligent partner in Karimov and Uzbekistan.

¶4. (C) By contrast, Karimov can appear remarkably shortsighted in other areas, such as macro-economic reform and democratic development. Karimov's horizon seems to be only three or four months down the road and no further. He has exhibited this tendency at least since the mid-1990s. Many of these policies, however, have outlived their usefulness and only serve to hamper economic growth and democracy building. Karimov clings to his Soviet command-style economic background, apparently believing that his populace can survive without cash as the National Bank starves the market of local currency.

A DEER IN THE HEADLIGHTS

15. (C) When faced with unexpected threats, however, Karimov's response appears to be retrenchment. In certain cases, like after the 1999 Tashkent bombings and the Rose Revolution in Georgia, Karimov has had a knee-jerk reaction that abandons much rational explanation. In the wake of Uzbekistan's worst terrorist attacks since 1999, Karimov has curiously done very little in the policy realm. He has placed the blame on his neighbors and Western countries like the U.K. He has shown no interest in innovation or new policies that could lead to loosening the Government's firm control over what is said in Uzbekistan's mosques. He also likely fears that any type of loosening would provide an opening for Hizb-ut Tahrir (HT) or other extremists. Additionally, Karimov sees no profit for himself in adopting major new economic policies. Elites, including members of Karimov's own family, are doing very well under current economic conditions. There is no incentive for these elite to make changes that might threaten their wealth. And he so thoroughly controls bank functions that virtually the entire financial system is under his thumb.

16. (C) In the past, Karimov has used distinctive occasions like the opening of an Oliy Majlis (legislature) session to make some sort of policy statement (ref A. On April 29, Karimov addressed the opening session of the Oliy Majlis (ref B), during which he focused on terrorism and laid the blame on the Western media, HT, and outsiders. While he did address the nation on Uzbek TV on March 30 after the first spate of suicide bombings (ref C), he did not do so after the July 30 events. In fact, in August, Karimov attended the opening session of the Oliy Majlis but chose not to make an address. He had perfect opportunity during the official Independence Day commemoration on August 31 to present a policy address, but he did not.

17. (C) Karimov's curious pause on the policy front at this time could simply be due to a lack of ideas and vision. He is a Soviet-era hold over, as is most of his government, who is focused on his position and ways to keep it. His lack of a vision for Uzbekistan's future is severely limited by his experiences as well as his preoccupation with security. Other leaders might have fired the top police chief, Interior Minister Almatov, or the intelligence czar, NSS Chair Inoyatov, for failure to prevent terrorist attacks. Such moves here, we expect, would only rock the political boat and upset Karimov's prized balance. In the meantime, he does little to address the question of why terrorists have found Uzbekistan fertile ground for recruiting people willing to die to oppose his regime.

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